

## *Drug could be godsend for poor countries*

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**U**BC researcher Kish Wasan is finding great success – almost ready for commercialization – with a cheap, benign version of a notoriously expensive drug that's rife with nasty side-effects.

The old drug – amphoterecin B, or "amp-the-terrible" as it is known in the lab – is a powerful antidote to life-threatening fungal infections. But it takes days or weeks in hospital to administer, it leaves patients with convulsions and the shakes, and it can damage the liver and kidneys.

The new pill is side-effect-free. In developed countries, it can extend life for AIDS and cancer patients, many of whom die of fungal infections well before the main disease has a chance to finish them off. And in poor countries, it could be a godsend to 200 million people a year who contract leishmaniasis, a fungal killer that most rich people have never heard of. It kills about 500,000 people a year in India alone.

So when the time comes for UBC, which owns the patent, to

sign a contract with a drug company to get it into production, which patients – the rich ones or the poor ones – do you think will be the target customers?

Well, thanks to a campaign by a small group of student activists and the response from the university, both groups will be targeted. The UBC chapter of a group called Universities for Essential Medicines announced this week that the university is the first Canadian institution to commit to ensuring that its drug discoveries are accessible to everyone in need. In this, it is following the lead of a handful of elite universities, including University of California (Berkeley) and Yale.

Barbara Campbell, UBC's associate director of industry liaison, notes that the policy isn't a totally done deal, but it soon will be. A draft is posted on the Web ([www.uilo.ubc.ca/global\\_perspective.asp](http://www.uilo.ubc.ca/global_perspective.asp)), and stakeholders and others are invited to comment in advance of a final policy statement, probably to be announced early this fall.

Andrew Gray, a UBC math and computer science grad who starts medical school in September, says the 12-member student group here is one of 35 across Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. Their goal is to encourage as many universities as possible to adopt similar policies, although they're wide open as to the mechanics of how they'll work.

A cooperating university's licensing agreement with a pharmaceutical company could, for example, require it to create a

two-price structure in order to make low-cost drugs available in poor countries. Or it could limit their licence to the developed world, and let low-cost generic firms get licences for poor countries.

It could also make provisions such as different shapes and colours of pills in different parts of the world to protect companies from low-cost drugs being smuggled out of poor countries.

Campbell said most stakeholder responses to date indicate some concerns about flexibility, but most are open to the idea.

She said about a dozen current research projects could eventually come under this policy, and complying with it could cost UBC a bit of money. But the belief – shared by president Stephen Toope, who has a background in human rights, as well as many others on campus – is that it will be worth it to see essential medicines get to everyone who needs them.

"It's true in any negotiation that if you're asking for five things instead of four, you may have to give a little more," she said. "So we understand that there may be some trade-offs."

On the other hand, there may be benefits, too. UBC has applied for funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for Wasan's project, among others, and the foundation requires universal access policies for all research projects it supports.

But to UBC's credit, its commitment is to the policy regardless of strings-attached funding.